

Breaking up is hard to do

TWO POSSIBLE disasters attend the events in Lithuania. One is the consequence for Mr Mikhail Gorbachev of pushing his present policy of raising tension to a full scale military clampdown. That would drag him into an occupation of the republic. Violence would almost certainly be used, the fragile democratisation process would be shattered and those in the west bending over backwards to "support" him on this issue would be alienated.

That is clear enough, presumably to him more than anyone. This is why his intimidatory actions have been accompanied by pleas for the Lithuanians to observe due process in their search for the independence which - Soviet officials and analysts say - he has conceded they will get.

The second is the consequence for the Lithuanians of demanding instant independence. If granted, it would ruin them. Like all other Soviet republics, Lithuania is heavily dependent on the rest of the Union - most of all on Russia - for its supplies, especially of raw materials and energy. Its goods, notably the electronics, in which it specialises, are of rather higher quality than elsewhere in the Soviet Union, but not of world quality. The hoped-for independent currency would be of little value unless links were severed with the rouble, but there are no hard currency reserves with which to support convertibility.

The West's obvious desire not to rock Mr Gorbachev's boat means that aid from that quarter would only materialise *in extremis*, and then only in the form of humanitarian assistance. The most likely outcome of independence, if achieved too soon and without agreement with the Soviet Union, would be impoverished autarky.

Lithuanian bluff

It is not clear why Mr Gorbachev does not call the Lithuanian bluff, by conceding the right to independence and then - as President de Gaulle did with the then French colony of Guinea in 1958 - ripping out the centrally controlled infrastructure and leaving the Lithuanians to it. He is presumably restrained by the strong senti-

ment in his party, and in the Supreme Soviet, which is hostile to any further concessions to the nationalist movements. It is to placate them that he has undertaken the strategy of bullying and threatening.

Both sides, then, have more to gain from jaw than war. Mr Gorbachev has said he will talk, but not negotiate: the semantics are probably unimportant, for some sort of bargaining will have to start.

Moral case

Both sides have good hands. The Lithuanians have a solid majority for independence, an overwhelming moral case in the illegal incorporation of their state into the Soviet Union in 1940 and an economy and society more open to the west than any other part of the Union (except for Latvia and Estonia). Mr Gorbachev has the economic levers as the stick, and as a carrot, the promise of legislation, already drafted for bringing forward to the present session of the Supreme Soviet, which will lay down a five-year process under which republics can gain independence.

Five years is likely to be too long for the Lithuanians - the time period would be a big part of any deal - but the complexity of unpicking the constitutional, economic and cultural links between the republic and the union will be complex and cannot sensibly be rushed. Furthermore, the promised economic reform of the Soviet Union gives Lithuanians the hope that the transition to the market economy that they must make could be managed within a reforming Soviet Union and not by a tiny country, shivering in economic isolation.

If Mr Gorbachev is sincere about letting Lithuania go, he must have accepted that other republics can and will go too. If so, he has already implicitly assumed the herculean task of de-imperialisation. It is much more satisfying for the Lithuanians, and for those of us who support their long-violated desire for freedom, to assert their rights immediately. But they need a deal. Mr Gorbachev still represents the best chance for them and all the suppressed nations of the Empire to get one.